

Local mental health board seeks to change name, membership

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The local mental health agency wants a new name and fewer board members.

As part of a rebranding effort to better reflect its range of services, agency officials said, the Calhoun Cleburne Mental Health Board would become known as Highland Health Systems. Meanwhile, the board wants to decrease in size by removing the city of Piedmont as an appointing authority — a power the city hasn't exercised since the 1990s.

The board, a nonprofit based in Anniston for nearly 50 years, approved the removal of Piedmont as an appointing authority in a meeting on Nov. 18, and the name change during a Jan. 20 meeting. Both changes, however, must be approved by all of its appointing authorities to be official. Those appointing authorities, besides Piedmont, include the cities of Anniston, Jacksonville, Weaver and Oxford, as well as the Calhoun and Cleburne County commissions.

The Anniston City Council discussed the amendments briefly during its Monday work session. City Manager Brian Johnson told the council that the board's changes would have no effect on the city. The council plans to vote on the amendments at its Monday meeting.

The Calhoun County Commission approved the amendments during its Thursday meeting.

During a Friday phone interview, Mickey Turner, executive director of the board, said he would not discuss why the board decided to remove Piedmont as an appointing authority.

"I can't discuss it because of legal issues," Turner said.

Jerry York, president of the board, also declined to discuss Piedmont during a Thursday phone interview, saying he wanted the information to come from Turner.

Removing Piedmont would shrink the board from 19 to 18 seats.

Piedmont Mayor Bill Baker said Thursday that he did not know much about his city's relationship with the board during the years, but did not oppose its decision.

"I'm OK with the fact that we don't have a representative," Baker said. "We're not giving any financial contribution, so I'm fine with it as it is."

Baker said Piedmont has not appointed anybody to the board since the 1990s. According to the board's records, Piedmont became an appointing authority in 1980.

Turner said many mental health agencies have changed their names during the years to better promote themselves and their services. Calhoun-Cleburne Mental Health has carried the same name since it was incorporated in 1967.

"We're trying to get away with the stigma associated with mental health," Turner said. "Also, Highland Health Services gives us a title that describes all our services."

The nonprofit provides services for mentally ill children and adults, the developmentally disabled and substance abusers. The facility also provides a pharmacy and some primary care services, such as blood pressure, diabetes and cholesterol tests.

Calhoun-Cleburne Mental Health has about 230 employees and treated around 5,500 patients last year. The nonprofit has an approximately \$14 million budget and receives money mainly from the Alabama Department of Mental Health and Medicaid.

The nonprofit also opened a 16-bed facility in Alexandria last year to provide mental health treatment for nonviolent patients committed by the Calhoun County Probate Office and for residents experiencing psychiatric emergencies.

Jim Reddock, commissioner of the Alabama Department of Mental Health, said Calhoun-Cleburne is one of 24 mental health boards in the state. All of them, by statute, operate independently and contract with the state to provide services, Reddock said.

Reddock said that as far as he knows, appointing authorities aren't much of a problem for the boards.

"Generally speaking, I don't think boards around the state have any significant issues with board members," Reddock said. "I meet with all the board directors in the state, and I've never heard them mention that as a problem."

Reddock said that several mental health boards in Alabama have changed their names during the years.

"A lot did do name changes in recent years to remove 'mental retardation' from their names ... that term is just not used anymore," Reddock said. "And some changed their name so it doesn't necessarily reflect the counties they serve."